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**Article:**

Munday, J [orcid.org/0000-0001-9870-3668](https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9870-3668) and Vasserman, E (2022) The name and nature of translation studies: A reappraisal. *Translation and Translanguaging in Multilingual Contexts*, 8 (2). pp. 101-113. ISSN 2352-1805

<https://doi.org/10.1075/tmc.00089.mun>

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# **The Name and Nature of Translation Studies: A reappraisal**

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James Stratton Holmes (Iowa, 1924—Amsterdam, 1986) is known as both a major translator/editor of poetry from Dutch (Brems and McMartin 2020, 2021) and as a teacher and researcher of translation, whose professional career was centred in the Netherlands at the University of Amsterdam. He has had a long-lasting influence on the development of the field of translation as an academic subject with his landmark essay “The Name and Nature of Translation Studies”. First presented at a 1972 conference in Copenhagen, it is “generally regarded as the founding statement of the discipline” (Gentzler 2001, 93). Yet, fifty years on, how valid is that essay in today’s context? We present a review and reappraisal of the essay in the context of Holmes’ academic work as a whole and to raise a few questions about the future and history of the discipline.

**Keywords:** Translation Studies; theory of translation; James S Holmes; the name and nature of translation studies.

## **1. Introduction**

On the desk lies a copy of *Translated! Papers on Literary Translation and Translation Studies*, featuring James Holmes' famous essay "The Name and Nature of Translation Studies" and through which that essay achieved widespread recognition. The first edition of *Translated!* was published in Amsterdam on 1 October 1988 in the Approaches to Translation Studies series of the Dutch publisher Rodopi, nowadays part of the Brill Group. It remains available today in both paperback and Kindle version. Edited by Raymond van den Broeck, and in homage to Holmes two years after his death, it brings together the latter's main writings on the theory and practice of translation. The title, with its awed exclamation mark, amusingly conjures up the popular 1943 Rodgers and Hammerstein musical *Oklahoma!*, which in the 1980s was enjoying a revival. The front cover, to tell the truth, does not do justice to the ground-breaking content: the blurry white text is scarcely legible against the silhouette of a tree's branches on a pale blue background.

The back cover of the second edition in 1994 features quotations from reviews of the collection. Three of them, in highly reputed journals, emphasise Holmes as a "pioneer" of Translation Studies: Theo Hermans' review in *New Comparison*, Hendrick van Gorp's in the second issue of the new international journal of Translation Studies *Target*, and Daniel Weissbort's in *Poetry in Translation*.

## **2. The *Translated!* volume and the Holmes Group**

It is impossible to evaluate the Holmes essay without describing its context at the time. Together with a small and select band working on literary translation (names such as Bassnett, Hermans, Lambert, Lefevere, Toury, van den Broeck and van Gorp), sometimes known as the “Holmes group” or more widely as the “Manipulation School” (see Hermans 1985), Holmes was crucial for the development of Translation Studies in the 1980s and beyond. Anyone entering literary translation research at that time would necessarily have taken keen note of this group and James Holmes’ work would have been amongst the first they read.

### **2.1 The name of the discipline**

Holmes’ proposed name for the new discipline was “Translation Studies” and this proved to be seminal to the establishment of the new field of research. The genetics of the essay makes an interesting case study since over the years it has appeared in various forms and formats. It was originally presented by Holmes at the Third International Congress of Applied Linguistics held in Copenhagen in August 1972, and then circulated in revised form in 1975 (at the University of Amsterdam) and appeared in 1987 in a special issue of the *Indian*

*Journal of Applied Linguistics* 13 (2), guest edited by Gideon Toury; but it was not widely acknowledged until the publication of *Translated!* in 1988, some sixteen years later. The slowness of its dissemination meant that its impact was delayed. By 1980, however, Susan Bassnett was using the title *Translation Studies* for her new introduction to the field, the success of which is evident from its numerous editions (1980, 1991, 2002, 2013). Bassnett (1980) indicated that André Lefevre had proposed the name in the proceedings of a 1976 colloquium in Belgium entitled *Literature and Translation* (Holmes, Lambert, and van den Broeck 1978). In a footnote, Bassnett acknowledges the “lead” that Holmes had taken in his essay, but at the time of the first edition of her book, she was only able to reference it as the 1975 “pamphlet” from the University of Amsterdam.

If we fast forward to 2022, “Translation Studies” has overwhelmingly emerged as the preferred term in most English-speaking environments, relegating alternative candidates such as the “Science of Translating” or “Translatology” to the periphery. An example of that consolidation is the change in name for the journal *Perspectives*; when it was founded in 1993 under the editorship of the Danish scholar Cay Dollerup and published by Multilingual Matters, it appeared with the subtitle *Studies in Translatology*. In Volume 25 (1) (2017), this subtitle was replaced under a new editor, Roberto Valdeón, and a new publisher, Routledge,

with *Studies in Translation Theory and Practice*. Meanwhile a new Routledge journal bearing the name *Translation Studies* had commenced in 2007-2008 under the editorship of Kate Sturge and Michaela Wolf.

However, the English name for discipline, which has become widespread, is not without rival. Harris (2011) details other possibilities and explains how in the early 1970s he himself proposed “Translatology” more or less at the same time as Holmes’ coinage. The long history of the discipline in German- and French-speaking countries has cemented their preference for *Übersetzungswissenschaft* and *Traductologie*. English “Cognitive Translatology” is now used for a specific research paradigm in interlingual translation investigation (Muñoz Martín 2010; Muñoz Martín, and González Fernández 2021). The names of other subdisciplines have also continued to change. Thus, the translation of what Katharina Reiss (1971/2000) called “audiomedial texts” has since been known as “screen translation” and “audiovisual translation” and now even “multi-modal translation”. In Translation Studies, terms are inherently unstable and always open to redefinition. The same may be said of the very concept of translation, which has expanded enormously over the years.

## **2.2 The nature of Translation Studies**

The name “Translation Studies” received further recognition in Gideon Toury’s major volume *Descriptive Translation Studies*, published by John Benjamins in 1995 and revised in 2012. In particular, Toury reproduces a

visual representation of Holmes' basic "map" of Translation Studies in the form of a tree diagram (1995, 10). There, Holmes' classification of the discipline into "pure" and "applied" is presented clearly to the reader as being majorly focused on pure, itself subdivided into "theoretical" and "descriptive" Translation Studies (Figure 1).

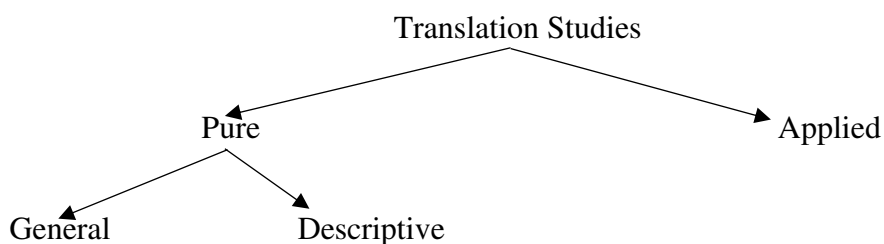


Figure 1: Higher level classification of Translation Studies in the Holmes/Toury map.

Interestingly, Toury describes as "unfortunate" and "confusing" the fact that, in some European universities, the Department of Translation Studies was the name given to the unit that tended to focus on the *practice* of translation rather than its research.

It is important not to view Holmes' "Name and Nature" paper in isolation from the other articles in the 1988 collection, where it first became accessible to a wider audience. The very act of collection and re-presentation causes us to reflect on the many facets of translation as a practice and as a field of research. The contents page displays the articles divided into these two classifications (Holmes 1988):

## Part One: The Poem Translated

1 Poem and Metapoem: Poetry from Dutch to English

2 Forms of Verse Translation and the Translation of Verse Form

3 The Cross-Temporal Factor in Verse Translation

4 Rebuilding the Bridge at Bommel: Notes on the Limits of  
Translatability

5 On Matching and Making Maps: From a Translator's Notebook

## Part Two: Studying Translation and Translation Studies

6 The Name and Nature of Translation Studies

7 Describing Literary Translations: Models and Methods

8 Translation Theory, Translation Theories, Translation Studies, and the  
Translator

9 The Future of Translation Theory: A Handful of Theses

10 The State of Two Arts: Literary Translation and Translation Studies  
in the West today

We can see that Holmes' contribution paired practical analysis of (his own)  
poetry translation with the rigorous investigation of translations and



translated contexts. In “Name and Nature”, he had already highlighted the importance of examining “language policy”: this encompasses “the role of the translation scholar in this area is to render informed advice to others in defining the place and role of translators, translating and translations in society at large” (Holmes 1988, 77-78). This counters the criticism that Holmes overlooked the role of the translators in their socio-cultural context. He himself closely allied Literary Translation and Comparative Literature as he pushed the emergence of Translation Studies. This is visible immediately from the titles of the articles above: Article 4 announces the study of the limits of translatability together with or illustrated by practical translation undertaken by Holmes in which the concept of equivalence is challenged; Part Two focuses on literary translation and uses the term “art” for both it and Translation Studies but also, in Article 8, specifically brings in the figure of the translator. There is no reference to other modes of translation, such as audiovisual translation, interpreting or intralingual translation, nor of ethical or sociological approaches to Translation Studies.

The papers collected in the volume were originally given in a variety of international colloquia or as invited talks in Belgium, Czechoslovakia, United States, Denmark, Canada, Soviet Union, and the Netherlands. The index of names (Holmes 1988, 115-117) is revealing of the influence of other theorists. If we just restrict ourselves to those who are mentioned on three or more different pages of *Translated!*, we have the following list:

Barthes (4 pages), Brower (6), Bühler (3), Catford (4), Dryden (3),  
Even-Zohar (6), Jakobson (7), Lefevere (4), Levý (11), Nida (7),  
Popovič (5), Richards (3), Wilss (3).

Of these thirteen, the vast majority are European, bridging East and West. True, some of the European names emigrated to or worked for a period in the United States and/or Canada (Catford, Jakobson, Lefevere, Popovič), but the overall picture is one of a tight-knit community of scholars who approached translation from a literary or comparative angle. Some of the figures in the list are there to be rebuffed. Hence, in “The Cross-Temporal Factor in Verse Translation” Holmes (1988, 42, footnote 3) dismisses those linguistics-oriented theorists who claim that a translation may be routinely equivalent to the original:

That the new message should ‘mean the same’ as the original message is, of course, the popular conception; that it should ‘correspond to’ or ‘is the equivalent to’ is the point of view advanced by Eugene A. Nida, J.C. Catford, and other prominent theorists of translation. The creating of an ‘illusion’ of equivalence is, I should suggest, a factor of greater importance, at least in literary translation, than has usually been recognized.

This takes a swipe at Nida’s concept of “equivalent effect” and Catford’s statistical analysis of likely translations of words or phrases located in pre-existing pairs or from contrastive analysis of different language systems.

To support his point about simple equivalence, Holmes concludes the footnote by referencing what he regards as the much more promising approach of Jiří Levý (1926-1967) in Czechoslovakia. Levý's influence on Holmes is apparent from the frequency of reference (on eleven different pages) and the distribution of these references (in six of the ten papers). How Holmes read Levý is not clear. Holmes himself (1988, 93), in Article 8, his plenary address to the 8<sup>th</sup> World Congress of the International Federation of Translators (held in Montreal in May 1977), admits that "the knowledge I have of Russian, Polish and Czechoslovak translation theory is based either on personal conversations or on articles that appear in translation or, in a few cases, on abstracts that students of mine have made for me". We may presume that he had ready access to Levý's article "Translation as a Decision Process", since it was published in English in 1969, but Levý's earlier major work appeared in Prague in 1963 as *Umenění Překladau* [The Art of Translation]. It is quite possible that Holmes would have read it in Walter Schamschula's 1969 German version, *Die Literarische Übersetzung: Theorie einer Kunstgattung* [Literary Translation: Theory of an Art Form]. Although draft English translations of part of the text may have circulated many years before, a full English language version, edited by Zuzana Jettmarová and translated by Patrick Corness, was not published until 2011; it bore the title *The Art of Translation*. By contrast, it is something of a surprise that there is no mention in *Translated!*, of the work of Andrei Fedorov (1906-1997) in the Soviet Union, despite references to Fedorov in

the work of Levý, Popovič and in the influential volume *On Translation*, edited by Reuben Brower (Harvard, 1958). However, Holmes did express awareness of the efforts of Soviet scholars in the conclusion to Article 9, a paper presented in Moscow in 1978:

I do not believe that I am speaking only for myself when I say that in the West one of the most urgent needs, if we are to come closer to the kind of translation theory that I have outlined, is for rapid, reliable, and extensive information, via translations and abstracts, on the vast amount of work that has been and is being done on translation theory in the Soviet Union. (Holmes 1988, 102).

These words are more than polite flattery towards Holmes' hosts. Indeed, the importance of the Eastern bloc's participation in the advances in translation theory cannot be underestimated. In his introduction to *Translated!*, editor van den Broeck talks of a succession of colloquia organised in Amsterdam, Antwerp, Leuven, Nitra, Tel Aviv in the 1970s and early 1980s; to these could be added Bratislava 1968 and the Fourth FIT Congress in Dubrovnik in 1963, which seem to have been meeting points for some of the participants. A number of edited volumes based on these colloquia were published and these are included in recommended further reading at the end of *Translated!* (110-111).

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<b>Editor</b>	<b>Title</b>	<b>Conference</b>	<b>Place of publication</b>	<b>Date of publication</b>
Holmes	<i>The Nature of Translation</i>	Bratislava (1968)	The Hague, Paris, Bratislava	1970
Holmes, Lambert and van den Broeck	<i>Literature and Translation: New Perspectives in Literary Studies</i>	Leuven (1976)	Leuven	1978
Even-Zohar and Toury	<i>Translation Theory and Intercultural Relations</i>	Tel Aviv (1978)	A special issue of <i>Poetics Today</i>  Vol 2. 4  Tel Aviv	1981

Lefevere	<i>The Art and Science of Translation</i>	Antwerp (1980)	Special issue of <i>Dispositio</i> 7: 19-21  Ann Arbor, Michigan	1982
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Additional recommendations listed Even-Zohar's *Papers in Historical Poetics* (Tel Aviv, 1978), Toury's *In Search of a Theory of Translation* (Tel Aviv, 1978), and Bassnett's *Translation Studies* (London, 1980). Hence, polysystems theory was prominent (Even-Zohar and Toury), while Bassnett's monograph was recommended by Holmes (1988, 111) as "the best book of all to start with" for those who wish to study literary translation.

Article 9 ("The Future of Translation Theory: A Handful of Theses") was presented at the International Symposium on Achievements in a Theory of Translation, held in October 1978 and organised by the Literary Translation Council of the Soviet Writers Union. As we have already noted, Holmes admitted he knew of the work carried out in the then Soviet Union only second hand. This type of language barrier was a constant impediment to the development of a general theory of translation; however, there is no

discussion by Holmes of the need to protect the diversity of languages and cultures by communicating research in and about lesser-used languages, perhaps because English had yet to achieve the dominance it has today.

In his contribution, Holmes described a series of weaknesses that need to be remedied in future research in Translation Studies. We summarise these below, together with a brief comment in italics on how the situation has evolved in the intervening decades:

1. The lack of communication between scholars in different disciplines. [*There is far more inclusivity and openness with scholars in other disciplines, part of the “outward turn” that will be discussed below*]
2. A tendency to generalise from the particular without rigorous methodology. [*Methodology is far more rigorous, particularly in cognitive studies*]
3. Linguists, whom Holmes describes as dominating translation theory, work too much on decontextualised lexis. [*The linguistic approach nowadays is far more about pragmatics and communication; even forms of machine translation now work on patterns of language rather than individual words*]
4. Too much focus on the microstructural. [*The microstructural is almost invariably contextualised in studies of translation shifts; this has been the case since highly influential*

*contributions to the first issues of Target (van Leuven-Zwart 1989; 1990)]*

5. The need to describe the features of the text and the context in which it functions communicatively. [*The advances of text type and genre analysis, together with the systemic functional approach, have answered this point*]
6. The question of equivalence, which for Holmes had become the need to describe and define a network of correspondences in translation, which was “a major task” of the translation theorist. [*Questions of equivalence and correspondence have been advanced enormously by the corpus-based approach and for practical translation by the introduction of CAT tools*]
7. The question of norms and laws was raised. Holmes’ argument was that any descriptions of what happens to meaning, pragmatics or form in the process of translation can only ever be a description of the norms that obtain in a specific time, place or text. [*This was a major point presented by Toury (1995; 2012) and in Pym et al. (2008)*]
8. Holmes bemoaned the naïveté of contemporary translation theories which overlooked the function of the target text. He argued that the “general” theory of translation would be thoroughly complex given the large number of variables.



*[Skopos theory developed this area in the 1980s, as Holmes acknowledged in a footnote to “Name and Nature...” (79, footnote 1)]*

9. The need for studies to bring together specialists from various fields. Holmes listed psycholinguistics, sociolinguistics, literary studies, psychology and sociology and specifically called for the involvement of practising translators. *[There have been enormous advances in this area and practising translators are routinely included in observational experiments and studies]*
10. Holmes gave an example of how to involve practising translators in research. These were through interviews carried out with translators who were observed producing the first draft of a translation and text. Such interviews, Holmes said, had already demonstrated that translation is not a serial process but involves a restructuring on a strategic level that leads to the revision and revisiting of the text in a non-linear way. *[This has been amply proven in studies using key-stroke logging and eye-tracking]*
11. Finally, there was the question of dissemination of research, which has been lacking either because of linguistic or physical barriers to the transfer of knowledge. *[The physical barriers to knowledge transfer have mostly disappeared in*

*the digital age, but others have emerged. So, although there has recently been a move in academia towards promoting research that has societal impact or contributes to public engagement, in some instances the financial costs are a major factor: on the one hand, the costs of open-access publication in certain outlets are a barrier to some authors while, conversely, the readership of some journals and monographs is restricted to those working in institutions that are able to afford the high costs.]*

These points enable us to glimpse Holmes' thoughts as to the future development of Translation Studies, some of which have proved prescient. Thus, on the last page of the *Translated!* volume, Holmes (1988, 110) highlights:

progress [...] in improving the quality of translator training and the role of the translator in today's world. We now have a much better model of the translation process, but we still have very little psychological insight into what really goes on inside the black box of the translator's brain.

The comment from Holmes about the "black box" is perhaps the best example of how things have developed extraordinarily since those times. Even at the end of the twentieth century, the most common form of scientific investigation of the process of translation was by think-aloud

protocol analysis, either simultaneously with or subsequent to the translation task. Technological advances have since revolutionised both the methods and results using eye tracking, keystroke logging, and now a whole range of neuroscientific studies. Such developments, which crucially depend on access to the latest technology, lead to insights into the working of synapses in the brain. But they presuppose that the researcher and their institution are backed by financial support for the purchase of the equipment and the training in methodology and process, often accompanied by employment of research fellows and assistants. In such experiments the translation aspect may be reduced to supplying the raw data (the translated texts, the interpreting, etc.) while the analysis, reliant on a science discipline and incorporation and interpretation of statistical data, is carried out by a specialist in that other field. This may mean that Translation Studies aspect of the research is side-lined by a more rigorous and entrenched scientific practice. But the potential is there for interdisciplinary research where the translation/interpreting specialist provides a perspective that otherwise would be lacking in the experiment. Something similar could be said to occur in other parts of the discipline. Thus, there continues to be a divide not only between linguistic and cultural-oriented translation theories but also between structured applications (machine translation, automatic translation software, etc.) and modes of analysis of literary translation.

### **3. Relevance for today**

The question is how far “The Name and Nature of Translation Studies” is still relevant to current times. It is a seminal paper in the development of Translation Studies that may best be regarded as a historical document that bears witness to the state of the discipline in its infancy. Its influence can be traced through its inclusion in anthologies of Translation Studies, introductory texts and handbooks. For example, it appeared in the first two editions of *Translation Studies Reader* published by Routledge in 2000 and 2004, but it is omitted from the third edition onwards. Editor, Lawrence Venuti, while acknowledging the significance and influence of the paper describes it as “limited if not simply hamstrung by the dubious distinctions Holmes attempted to draw and for the omission of anything on ethics, history and sociology” (Venuti 2012, 138). Andrew Chesterman makes a similar point in a paper called “The Name and Nature of Translator Studies” (2009); he presents a possible sketch of translator studies that subdivides the field into cultural, cognitive and sociological sub-branches. This is further advanced by his entry for “Translator studies” in the online *Benjamins Handbook of Translation Studies* (Chesterman 2021). When it comes to the “applied” side of the Holmes-Toury map, this was challenged and expanded in the third edition of *Introducing Translation Studies* (Munday 2012) in order to provide a more detailed link to translator training and the profession.

At the end of *Translated!* the concluding words of Holmes (1988, 112) are as follows: “the state of the art of Translation Studies is better than ever before. It is not good. There is so much still to be done”. From the standpoint of 2022, the panorama has shifted. Translation Studies, no longer an art, is more prominent than ever and has demonstrated a versatility that would have been almost unimaginable at the time of the 1972 paper. There is so much still to be done, but it is being done much more meticulously and comprehensively and in a more methodologically rigorous way than in the past.

The question of discarding Holmes’ paper from introductory texts is a constant. For example, it featured prominently in the first edition of *Introducing Translation Studies* (Munday 2001) and the diagrammatic map has been retained through all the additions up to and including the recent fifth edition (Munday, Ramos Pinto, and Blakesley 2022) when the reader is encouraged to critique the map and propose revisions (see also Pym 2010). Given the flourishing of research activity over the past decades, it seems an anomaly to retain the prominence of the map for any other than purely historical or basic conceptual reasons. A foundational statement, certainly, but not one that should restrict Translation Studies and certainly not one that, by remaining so prominent, should discourage new scholars from embracing the multiplicity of perspectives that pertain today.

The question then becomes one of how to replace it. In the third edition of *Introducing Translation Studies* (2012), the initial chapter presenting the development of the discipline was expanded not only to include non-western perspectives but also to incorporate new schemata and representations of the field. Thus was added the article by Luc van Doorslaer that appeared in a special issue of *Target* devoted to translation metalanguage (published in 2007). But even these new schemata are dated. What we are seeing in today's Translation Studies is indeed an "outward turn", as described by Bassnett and Johnston (2019) and reinforced Vidal Claramonte (2022) in the entry for the term in the open-access online *Encyclopedia of Translation and Interpreting* in Spain. Such publications have the potential to open up knowledge to a broader public. In this new view, the concept of translation is expanded and is to be found everywhere; it is an ever-present of cultural exchange.

Translation Studies, therefore, is locating itself at the interface of many disciplines; it is interdisciplinary, or even multidisciplinary, in nature, most potent when collaborating across the spectrum that is far more than "art" or "science". It occupies some of the space on the map that has been ceded by the decline in modern languages, certainly in many Anglophone languages. Like the image of the Phoenician trader (McCarty 2005; Munday et al. 2022), it navigates confidently along a continuum from the most technical computational linguistics to the most innovative sociological or

philosophical theories. This represents a rich development of Holmes' map, but one that hopefully he would have celebrated. It would also echo, in the Introduction of *Translated!*, the closing homage paid by van den Broeck "to the thinking of a man who not only did pioneering work in his field but whose views on translation will continue to stimulate future generations" (van den Broeck 1988, 5).

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**Publication history**

Date received: 24 April 2022

Date accepted: 25 May 2022